

Communication design and community: pedagogy and empowerment

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Abstract

This paper will discuss two social action initiatives that were undertaken as part of communication design courses offered in Australia and New Zealand. Each initiative involved student designers collaborating with a discreet community on a project that each community had identified as of importance to them. It provided the students with valuable industry experience and with the opportunity to think not only critically about the world in which they live, but also to think about how designers can make ethically responsible work, rather than churning out logos, brands and adverts aimed at encouraging rampant materialism and fostering the shallowness of western culture. This may seem antithetical to the purposes of design education, yet almost all university design courses identify both a worldview and a practice grounded in ethics as desired graduate attributes. We see art and design education in terms of Atkinson's notion of pedagogies against the state, in particular 'pedagogy as a form of resistance to liberal democratic economics as the driving *raison d'être* for state education' (Atkinson, 2012 p. 15).

Working within community settings is not a novel concept. Artists, either individually or whilst working alongside communities have attempted to depict historical stereotypes or assumptions that have shaped collective memory and identity (Desai & Hamlin, 2010). However, in an attempt to define its boundaries, communication design education appears to have aligned itself with the 1% of the population who control the state (Landers, 2012). Located in Freire's theories of empowerment through participation, (Benmayor, 2008; Freire, 1972) the art we make demands that designers use their skills to become part of the solution rather than as one of those

who sit on the fence silently yet vicariously supporting the problem. We believe that designers do have a valuable role to play in increasing the store of humanities knowledge by designing 'like the world matters' (Gablik, 1991).

KEYWORDS: design pedagogy, empowerment, social action

Introduction

As a way of understanding the complex world in which we live, postmodernity offers us the freedom to engage in improvised strategies, which cultivate dedication, reflexivity and creativity (Taylor, 2005). It challenges the right of organizations to impose roles, rules and procedures upon individuals' and instead seeks to empower individuals to be proactive in decisions that affect their lives (Taylor, 2005). As a result, it could be argued that postmodernity imposes certain responsibilities on individuals, as it intrinsically demands a commitment to human rights principles, which include:

- That everyone has the right to experience dignity in their lives:
- That everyone has the right to participate in decisions that affect them;
- That everyone has the right to live free from discrimination; and
- That everyone has the right to have his or her culture respected.

A commitment to human rights principles drives the individual to engage in social action. Human rights and social action are inextricably linked, because social action refers to the way that a person demonstrates their commitment to human rights principles in their everyday lives (Gray & Young, 2011). With this aim in mind, this paper seeks to articulate the role that communication designers have to play in progressing the empowerment discourse and to embed these ideas into communication design pedagogy. Located in Freire's theories of empowerment through participation, (Benmayor, 2008; Freire, 1972) it demands that designers use their skills to become part of the solution rather than as those who sit on the fence silently yet vicariously supporting the problem. Because there is little that has been written about communication design pedagogy and human rights, this paper draws on literature from a number of related disciplines, such as architecture, community cultural development and postmodern approaches to therapy and extrapolates the key principles that can be applied to the design industry. We believe that designers do have a valuable role to play in increasing the store of humanities knowledge by designing 'like the world matters' (Gablik, 1991).

Design education

Out of what may be regarded as a set of practical technologies, communication design has over the last century been enveloped into the higher education system; an institution which Mewburn (2010) asserts is filled with unexamined and tacit assumptions about the profession and society as a whole. Its emergence has become embedded in the matrix of educational practices providing information to be known, examined and graded, propagating the system of knowledge expert and disciple—a system which invests the knowledge with power and which continues to operate beyond the educational system and into the professional realm (Young, 2005). Hoskin (1993) describes as a historical 'discontinuity', the dramatic change in how students 'learned to learn' that took place in the early nineteenth century. Through the techniques of examination, grading and 'an insistent process of writing by students, about students, and organizationally around students' a transformation to a formal and numerical system took place. This system becomes one of self-disciplining through the promotion of competition with peers and for marks as a 'currency that denotes self worth', whilst simultaneously creating new forms of knowledge-power through the creation of the new disciplines that emerged out of this system, and offering a powerful 'economy of knowledge' (Hoskin, 1993).

Effectively taking designers out of the apprenticeship model and placing them in the studio, students learn their craft by imagining the range of possible solutions that can be reached to resolving hypothetical client problems. At the same time, by placing the learning in an institutionalized environment, we have seen the emergence of a set of power relationships, which have privileged certain ways of understanding what communication design encompasses and what it excludes. The emergence of communication design does not only refer to the development of the profession or the expansion of certain creative technologies. It refers to the development of a set of dynamic and political objectives, which need to be recognised for their direct effect in terms of what Foucault (1972) considers 'enunciative modalities'. Whilst ostensibly examining the history of design, they in fact demonstrate notions of what the object design is, who may speak about it, and in what terms (Young, 2005). This has the effect of consolidating and justifying particular ways of knowing design. It constructs relations to other discourses, demonstrates the legitimacy of certain techniques and practices, and presents various canonical references (Young, 2005). To understand what has been privileged, it becomes important to look at what has been discarded and to recognize what is contained in the negative spaces—what is forgotten or who is excluded (Gray, 2012).

As a result of the way that design has become known, communication design students spend much of their time churning out logos, brands and adverts aimed at encouraging rampant materialism and fostering the shallowness of western culture (Gray & Young, 2012). Often lost in this process are opportunities to create ethically responsible work that challenges the grand narratives that have been allowed to define our culture.

This may seem antithetical to the purposes of design education, yet almost all university design courses identify both a worldview and a practice grounded in ethics as desired graduate attributes. We see art and design education in terms of Atkinson's notion of pedagogies against the state, in particular 'pedagogy as a form of resistance to liberal democratic economics as the driving *raison d'être* for state education' (Atkinson, 2012).

The 1% who control the state

In challenging our place at the table of the '1% who control the state', whom Landers (2012) claims exploit the other 99%; as the ones who vicariously promote the values and lifestyles of these one percenters, it seems impossible not to draw comparisons with the fallout from recent tobacco litigation cases that took place in Victoria Australia in 2006, in particular *McCabe v British American Tobacco Australia Services Limited* [2002] VSC 73 (The McCabe case). Rolah McCabe, a long-term cigarette smoker, commenced proceedings against British American Tobacco (BAT) in negligence at common law in 2002. Her claim was that BAT were responsible for her contracting cancer, as they knew the effect smoking could have on the human body, but instead chose to keep their research confidential. As a result of the alleged 'document retention policies' instigated by BAT's legal representative Clayton Utz, the plaintiff was unable to prove her case as all evidence that could have proved harmful to the defense had been destroyed. The subsequent outcome of the trials that ensued prior and post to McCabes inevitable passing, resulted favorably for BAT. However, the spotlight quickly shifted to the document retention policies of the Law firm that had represented BAT. By effectively making the problem their solution, Clayton Utz's alleged 'document retention policy' was in fact the antithesis of what it said it purported to do as no documents were actually retained. In response to this policy, which if able to be scrutinized under the *Crimes Act* (Vic) 1914, would have been considered as the illegal act of tampering with evidence, the State Government initiated both legislative and policy reforms of its own. Firstly, the Sallman report was commissioned (Sallman, 2004), which resulted in a change in the way that legal representatives are allowed to conduct discovery in Victoria. Secondly, changes were made at the policy level: large law firms can now only bid for Government contract work if they can show that they have engaged in a certain percentage of pro bono work for clients who cannot afford representation. We wonder what the impact may

have been if the legal spotlight had been shifted a further couple of degrees, to the company that designed the cigarette packaging, and questioned the choices they made to describe and sell the product. One wonders indeed if they too should be included in proceedings that challenge the right of the elite to inculcate potential customers to buy into a self-harming lifestyle—that is, to buy life destroying products. Perhaps now it is time to consider, in order to balance what they produce, which may be ethically suspect and which works frequently to increase the gap between the rich and the poor, how much work communication designers should also engage in that is focused on ‘stimulating public awareness, arousing public indignation, and fostering collaborative action to find ways of rectifying human tragedy (Washington & Moxley, 2008). In the twenty first century, we have to accept that we live in a globalized society where large transnational corporations expropriate precious resources that perpetuate cycles of poverty and deprivation, contributing to the destruction of our planet, and which results in the fracturing of local economies and communities (Chile, 2007).

We also have to accept the power that visual communication levers. Crain, (2010, as cited in Jhahly), who was the former senior editor of America’s leading publication on advertising notes that only 8% of the messages contained in adverts are received by the conscious mind, with the other 92% being worked and reworked over time deep within our subconscious (Jhally, 2010). Based on who is represented and what they are doing in that environment sends strong messages to us about who belongs and what matters.

Providing communication design students with new ways of knowing the world

For the past ten years, we have built into the design curriculum opportunities for students to work on briefs that involve understanding the issues that affect a whole raft of diverse communities. They have included poster campaigns, exhibitions, installations, theatre shows and digital media storytelling projects. It has seen them work on real projects with people experiencing homelessness, women who live with HIV, with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) communities, with people living in poverty and on environmental campaigns. The work that has been produced through these initiatives has real outputs both for the clients and the students. Much of it has been identified as best practice, some has contributed to legislative reform, some has contributed to the development of significant social marketing campaigns and some has been accepted into the permanent collection of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI). The aim of the work is to educate the students about issues that affect members of the communities of which they are a part, to dispel constantly perpetuated myths and then to ask them to consider how they can use their skills to respond appropriately to

what they learn. In this regard, the work has both a personal and social aim, as it seeks to shed light not only on the issue being represented, but on the meta-narratives of the world and our roles within them. The work also provides students with the opportunity to challenge wider social and cultural discourses because it allows them to see how and where they belong. It seeks to address the structural and historical factors that impede ‘free, equal and uncoerced participation in society’ (Jacobs, 2011). The projects act as a form of action research where the client and designer become co-researchers, with the client seen as the expert on content, and the designer as the expert on process (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

Artists working on social action campaigns is not a new or novel concept. Artists have a long history of working alongside communities to tell and retell histories in an attempt to depict historical stereotypes or assumptions that have shaped collective memory and identity (Desai & Hamlin, 2010). However including this way of thinking, acting and responding has never been a significant part of design pedagogy. At a time in their lives, when students are arguably the most politically aware, or are at the very least open to new ideas and concepts, the opportunities for using their skills to reflect their values tends not to be addressed in the core curriculum. Instead, what has become apparent is that communication designers sit in an unresolved space—trying to decide whether their skill is a craft or a tool of connoisseurship that mystifies their work and makes it appear heightened and special. We believe that what makes it special is its ability to convey important messages. So what would we like these messages to be conveying? Graduating students tell us of the disillusionment they experience on entering the profession, once they realize that they are not engaging in a creative process, but are instead engaged in the selling of values that often sit uncomfortably with their own life choices.

Same difference

Same Difference was a project that was undertaken by communication design students at Swinburne University in collaboration with the ALSO Foundation (an organization that represents the rights of GLBTI communities) and the Department of Justice. It involved students working on an exhibition of posters that responded to homophobia. Douglas Scott *et al* define homophobia as ‘the unreasonable or irrational fear and hatred of homosexuals because of their sexual identity’ (Douglass Scott, Pringle, & Lumsdaine, 2004).

11% of Australians identify as being either gay, lesbian or bisexual, and whilst a recent national survey showed that acceptance of GLBTI people in Australia is increasing (Flood & Hamilton, 2005), these communities continue to be subject to high levels of homophobic harassment, violence and abuse.

A 2005 Victorian survey of GLBTI people found the following forms of harassment:

- 80 per cent of respondents had experienced public insult;
- 70 per cent had been publicly abused;
- 20 per cent had experienced explicit threats; and
- 13 per cent had been physically assaulted (McNair & Thomacos, 2005)

In unpicking the inherent biases in the accepted definition of homophobia, what appears as irrational to Douglas Scott and her colleagues is experienced as rational and reasonable by the holders of those beliefs. For example, although it is generally understood that violence is a crime and is not acceptable behaviour, abuse and violence directed towards GLBTI people is often not understood in the same way (Mason, 1993). Rather than being seen as criminal, these acts are often viewed as a form of ‘group policing’ aimed at perpetuating dominant masculine identities (Connell, 1995). Continued derogatory and insulting remarks by prominent media personalities serve to reinforce intolerance and have the effect of endorsing discriminatory behaviour (Flood & Hamilton, 2005).

Ironically, Richard Florida’s influential text *The Rise of the Creative Class* argues that in the new global economy, markets depend on flexibility and attracting what he terms ‘the creative class’ (Florida, 2002). They constitute a class, which includes communication designers. They are young, imaginative and flexible in their work practices and are attracted to organisations that offer both an open work environment and a diversity of lifestyle options. In an effort to attract members of the creative class, companies are locating to regions with a high degree of social and cultural diversity. Florida found a direct correlation between a region’s degree of diversity and its concentration of gay people. He proposes using what he terms the “gay index” as a measure of a region’s social and cultural diversity. Clearly, according to Florida’s analysis a homophobic culture is one that encourages neither diversity nor the economic growth that comes with attracting members of the creative class.

The diversity of the Victorian population is one of its greatest assets. It enriches and enlivens the social, cultural and economic life of the State and provides a springboard for greater understanding between individuals and communities (Gray, Leonard, & Jack, 2006). The Harassment of GLBTI Victorians is unjust, at odds with the Human Rights Charter¹ and against the law. At the inaugural international conference on LGBT human rights, held in 2006, The Declaration of Montreal states: ‘In a society where some people are oppressed, nobody can be free and equal (Montreal, 2006).

¹ *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic)*

As a response to the significant and consistent levels of homophobic violence that occurs in Victoria, the Attorney General commissioned a report that identified potential strategies aimed at reducing homophobia. The report noted that legislative reform alone was not a sufficient response to generate and maintain behavioural change. Rather a public education campaign was needed to achieve the broader cultural shifts on which changes in individual and community attitudes and behaviours depend (Gray, et al., 2006). This is consistent with world standard social marketing techniques and practices.

The brief was on the surface simple. Create a poster campaign that aims to decrease homophobic violence and harassment. However, in order to understand the issue, students had to educate themselves not only about homophobia but also about human rights and social justice. In the end it challenged their own value systems and asked that they lend their support and use their creative resources to participate in the fight against discrimination.

A selection of the campaigns was curated into an exhibition that was held at the newly opened Justice Museum in the city centre. The exhibition venue was chosen because as the first official watch house located in Victoria, it was noted that the GLBTI community had always been traditionally overrepresented as prisoners in the facility. The exhibition was also launched in the week that the commissioned report was handed over to the Attorney General. As a result of the two pronged approach, the written report and the highly visual exhibition, significant legislative reform is now being considered and funding was provided to the ALSO foundation to mount a statewide anti-homophobia campaign, which was launched in August of this year.

Altered lives

Since antibody testing was introduced in New Zealand in 1985, almost 2500 people have been diagnosed with HIV in New Zealand of whom about 400 are women (Positive Women, 2008). Once classified as 'the gay man's disease', heterosexual HIV infection in New Zealand has steadily increased to the point in 2006 where it outpaced that of men who have sex with men (Positive Women, 2008) and the majority of new HIV infections throughout the world occur in women (Squire, 2003).

As Bruning, the spokesperson for Positive Women (2008) states: "The stigma associated with HIV and AIDS is such that almost all HIV positive women keep their HIV status a secret, fearing negative reactions and discrimination against themselves and their families." This is in light of the fact that increases in pharmacotherapy have in recent years seen the profile of HIV downgraded from a fatal illness to a manageable chronic disease extending over many years

(Plach, Stevens, & Keiger, 2005).

Students from Auckland University of Technology (AUT) collaborated with Positive Women to produce a series of digital storytelling projects aimed at de-stigmatizing what it means to live with HIV. The project involved a number of stages: firstly oral histories were collected from women who live with HIV, that told some of their stories about living with this disease. Secondly, the histories were turned into short scripts, each approximately 8 minutes in length, which were finally translated into animations by the student designers. Working with similar intentions to the *Same Difference* project, the aim was to challenge the construction of how HIV has been contextualized in western society.

Some of the participants had constructed stories that revolved around the guilt and shame of contracting the illness; others around the consequent depression that accompanied their diagnosis. Some were about preparing to die. For some it meant that they had denied themselves the right to form intimate relationships with others, the right to be parents or the right to plan for a future. Most importantly it limited their capacity to ‘sustain their heart, mind and soul,’ which is seen as essential to the self care and wellness of women as they grow older with HIV (Plach, et al., 2005).

These stories were located in dominant ideologies of prejudice that revolved around being seen as deviants who are sexually promiscuous, involved in illegal drug use or in women being stupid and naive when it came to taking responsibility for their sexuality. In dispelling these myths, this project sought to show the illness as a community concern, rather than about a pathology or reflection of the women’s character. Indeed, the most predominant way that women contract HIV in the western world is through the search to find true love, which is, after all what all human beings seek.

The resulting animations are used in a myriad of educational and health settings – but they also have significant cultural value as they act as snap shots of the life of women in the 21st century—stories that to date have gone untold.

It's not rocket science

Working within a human rights framework is not rocket science, but it is challenging. Partnering with organizations and communities to create socially significant work is a process that takes time. The essential ingredient is a shared desire to add value to the world in which we live and to co-create the outcomes. Empowerment, which is the shared feature of postmodernism and

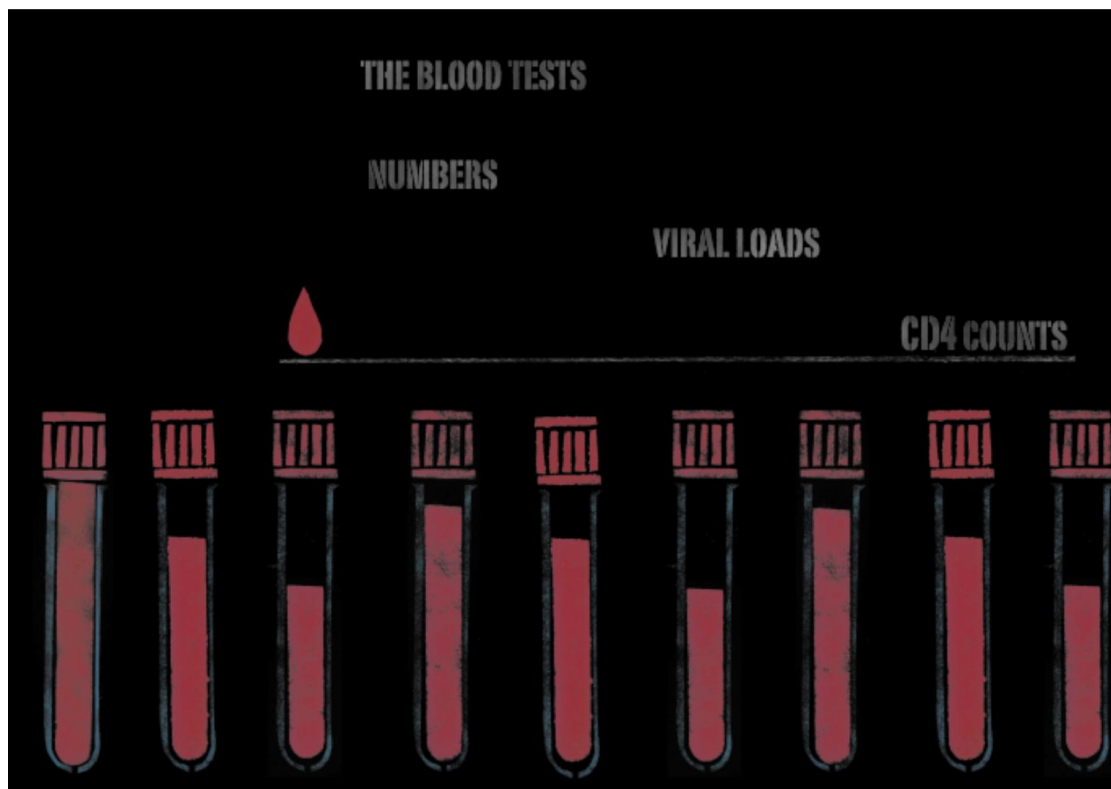
human rights has been understood to involve a shift from a top down approach, from experts to a participatory practice with either individuals or communities aimed at strengthening their capacity for social action and change (Jacobs, 2011; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). It is seen as a collaborative social action process, where the personal experiences and values of communities play a crucial role in identifying themes and solutions alongside professionals and policy makers (Broner, Franczak, Dye, & McAllister, 2001; Jacobs, 2011; Matarasso, 2007).

A common misconception about empowerment is that professional disempowerment must occur in order for individuals or communities to take control of their destinies (Jacobs, 2011). Under this premise, communication designers would put down their pens or let go of their mouse and act as teachers, upskilling individuals to create their own design outcomes. However, training participants to use equipment and software can be time consuming and the aesthetic quality of the finished product can vary immensely (Clarke & Adam, 2011). As a result, the process is not always validating, and can be counter-productive. Regarding empowerment through giving community members the power of directly creating their own video work, Boyle makes the comment: ‘once the novelty wore off, many community members had little interest in becoming video producers’ (Boyle, 1992). In viewing the process as an act of co-creation Labonte states: ‘Empowerment exists only as a relational act of power taken and given in the same instance’ (Labonte, 1993) p. 49. The collaboration results in what Burgess (2006) suggests is an ‘ethical democratic access for participants whilst maximizing relevance and impact for the intended audience’. As Burgess states:

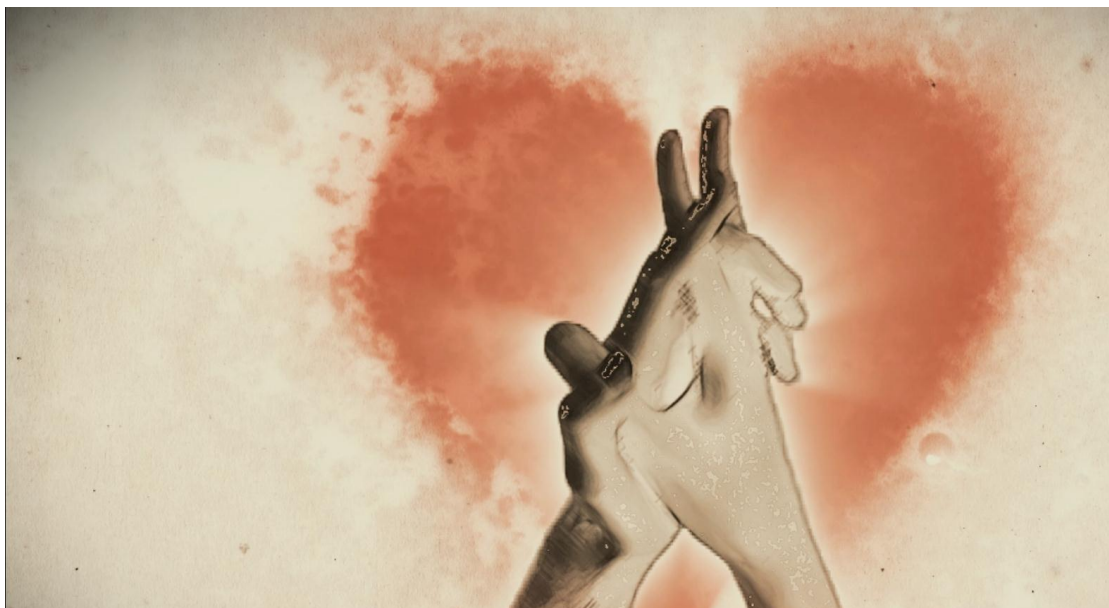
[The task is] not to speak heroically on behalf of ordinary voices, but to find ways to understand and practically engage with the full diversity of existing and emerging media contexts in which they are, or are not, being heard (Burgess, 2006).

But here is the part that is challenging if empowerment is seen as an act of co-creation: for designers working with communities or on social action campaigns, the task is to remember that whilst the process is essentially to partner with marginalized communities, the message is as much geared towards the protagonist. For example *Same Difference* was a campaign aimed at the bullies just as much as it was aimed at normalizing a variety of sexualities. In effect, empowerment, as a tool aimed at reducing inequality, works in two directions. Whilst dealing with specific problems experienced by marginalized communities, it simultaneously demands that the spotlight be placed directly on to the actions of the one percenters as it is their choices and behaviors that tacitly assist in creating the current power imbalances. A central tenet of our work is to extricate communication design from hegemonic practices—practices which maintain and

support dominant and destructive power relations. This offers students at least the possibility of making personal and informed choices in the uses to which they put their skills.



Artwork by Sue Lim



Artwork by Shea Melville



Artwork by Olivia Moor

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